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UNCLAS LILONGWE 000001

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: VP RESIGNS FOUR MONTHS BEFORE ELECTIONS

REF: 03 LILONGWE 1202

1. (U) On January 1, First Vice President Justin Malewezi announced that December 31, 2003 was his last day in office and that he has resigned as First Deputy National Chairman of the ruling United Democratic Front (UDF). In his press release, Malewezi said he made the decision for personal reasons and will comment more fully on his future plans in two weeks, after he has "had time to reflect on (his) options." Apart from confirming receipt of Malewezi's resignation, neither the Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC) nor the UDF have commented. (NOTE: Malewezi officially still encumbers the vice presidency. He is taking leave until his mandate ends with the May 2004 elections.)

2. (U) The OPC, however, did announce that UDF 2004 vice presidential candidate Cassim Chilumpha will take up Malewezi's secondary position of Minister of Privatization.

COMMENT

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3. (SBU) Malewezi's resignation from the UDF is a serious blow to the party and to its chances of winning the May presidential elections. He is widely regarded as among the most capable, hard-working, and honest of UDF leaders, and he has taken lead roles in HIV/AIDS, food security, and privatization. He was criticized by party stalwarts for not being supportive enough of a third term for President Muluzi, and his relations with the President have been lukewarm ever since. When Muluzi hand-picked outsider Bingu wa Mutharika as his successor in March, the rupture was complete. Although Malewezi has been marginalized in the government over the past year, he nevertheless offered it a measure of credibility. His abrupt resignation has exacerbated party disarray, and has led to speculation about other high-level defections. The big question now is what Malewezi will do next -- throw his support to an opposition candidate or consider a presidential run of his own. END COMMENT.  
BROWNING